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Abel, Red Spy, Dies; Freed in 1962 Swap

Special to The New York Times

MOSCOW, Nov. 16 — Col. Rudolf Abel, whose name became almost a synonym for "master spy" after the disclosure of his nine years of successful undercover operation in the United States, died yesterday of lung cancer at the age of 68.

A Campaign Role

Rudolf Ivanovich Abel, whose known aliases included Emil R. Goldfus, Martin Collins, Andrew Kayotis and Mark, had been living in the Soviet Union since 1962, when he was exchanged for Francis Gary Powers, the American pilot of a U-2 spy plane downed over the U.S.S.R. in 1960. Colonel Abel had served about 4½ years of the 30-year prison sentence he received in 1957 on espionage charges.

The Soviet Union at first contended that there had been no basis for Colonel Abel's arrest. But within three years of his release, his role was officially acknowledged as part of a Soviet campaign glorifying the contributions of intelligence agents to the nation's defense.

Even during his trial in New York City in October of 1957, Colonel Abel's direct involvement in specific cases of stolen defense secrets remained vague. But shortly after he was arrested in the Latham Hotel on East 28th Street in Manhattan, on June 21, 1957, by agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Allen W. Dulles, then the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, said: "I wish we had three or four [intelligence agents] like him inside Moscow right now."

In recent years, Colonel Abel gave some details of his operation, writing in a 1966 magazine article that his radio equipment for communicating with Moscow was in the hotel room when the Federal agents arrived. He said that he had disposed of a decoding device and a radio message from Moscow under the eyes of the agents — a claim that the F.B.I. disputed.

Life as an Artist

During his trial, the only charge he admitted was that he had entered the United States illegally from Canada in 1948. He apparently used the alias of Andrew Kayotis, which he soon discarded in favor of Emil R. Goldfus, under which name he rented a studio at 252 Fulton Street, within sight of the courthouse where he was tried and convicted, and lived an inconspicuous life as an artist.

Behind this facade of a moderately talented painter with a taste for radio mechanics and mathematics, Colonel Abel led the demanding secret life of a "resident" or communications head of an espionage network. The details of Colonel Abel's routine were the raw material of which countless paperback novels have been made, but lacking in the glamour, high-living and romantic involvements of fictional spies.

Associated Press, 1957

Col. Rudolf I. Abel

There were microfilmed messages left inside hollowed-out screws in the bases of lamp-posts in New York City parks and casual meetings in Queens movie theaters, and hours of work deciphering the intricately coded Soviet messages.

Colonel Abel's ability to blend with an alien background included a gift for languages; his English was reported to be not only accurate but also colloquial. According to an allegedly autobiographical article published in the youth monthly Molodoi Kommunist, Colonel Abel's linguistic ability was one of the reasons why he decided intelligence work was his metier. He was also, he wrote, "attracted to both radio engineering and the adventurous aspect of a secret service agent."

He wrote that he was born into the family of a St. Petersburg factory worker exiled for revolutionary activities, served in the Red Army, and joined the Soviet intelligence establishment in 1927. Although little has been disclosed about his activities until his arrival in the United States in 1948, there are indications that he penetrated the German intelligence service during World War II under the name of Johann Weiss.

Admitted Illegal Entry

His professional downfall, after nine years of successful work in the United States, came about through the defection of an assistant, Reino Heyhanen. Heyhanen, reputedly a heavy drinker and an unreliable agent, defected after having been ordered back to Moscow by his superiors.

During the days of his arrest, trial and imprisonment, Colonel Abel displayed the poise and wit expected of the master spy. He admitted nothing beyond his illegal entry. His lawyer, James B. Donovan, called no defense witnesses and based the defense less on substantive issues, of which there were few, than on constitutional ones, and carried the appeal of Colonel Abel's conviction to the United States Supreme Court.

It was Mr. Donovan also who arranged for the exchange of Abel and the U-2 pilot, which took place on a fog-shrouded bridge between East Germany and West Berlin.

A tall, thin, wispy-haired man with a beaky profile and glasses, Colonel Abel himself described his vocation in an article in Molodoi Kommunist:

"Intelligence work is not a series of rip-roaring adventures, a string of tricks or an entertaining trip abroad. It is, above all, arduous, painstaking work that calls for an intense effort, perseverance, stamina, fortitude, will power, serious knowledge and great mastery."

Colonel Abel is assumed to have had a wife, Helen, and a daughter, Lidiya. Affectionate letters from his daughter were read during his trial—producing, some observers said, the only signs of distress from the composed colonel — and after his return to the Soviet Union, both women published a letter in Izvestia, the Government newspaper, thanking Nikita Khrushchev, then the Soviet leader, for having made the exchange.